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"We Are Singing Alone": *Norae Bang* (Korean Karaoke) and Contemporary Korean Young People

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Abstract

"We Are Singing Alone": *Norae Bang* (Korean Karaoke) and Contemporary Korean Young People

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This paper explores the phenomenon of singing alone by Korean young people in *'koin norae bang*,' a new type of karaoke that recently emerged in South Korea. Assuming that the popularity of the *koin norae bang* singing among these young people is deeply associated with the socioeconomic circumstances confronting Korean young people today, I investigate the meaning of this leisure practice for these young people as a reflection of their negotiations with the circumstances constraining their lives. I draw on contemporary youth research, which stresses the structural forces that influence the cultural lives of young people and notes specifically the impact of the changed structure of youth transitions on their leisure experiences. With the high rate of youth unemployment alongside the growth of the participation in higher education, Korean young people today are suffering from the exacerbated living conditions, and their leisure lives are becoming more impoverished. Thus I argue that the leisure form of *koin norae bang* represents the status of contemporary Korean young people as socially isolated and economically marginalized.

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Introduction

As I went up to the third floor and opened the entrance that had a sign saying "koin norae bang," there was a long corridor in the middle and on both sides of it were filled with a dozen doors in a row surrounding the walls. Each door had a large transparent window through which was seen a space as small as 3.3 square meters equipped with karaoke apparatus, a screen, and a chair. Many of the rooms were already occupied with people; one or two persons per each room, who were either standing or sitting on a chair with their back at the door, grabbing a microphone while gazing into the screen. Amplified music sounds mixed with singing voices enhanced through microphones were continuously leaking through each of the door and filling the whole corridor creating a messed-up soundscape. There existed neither a manager nor a counter in the establishment. Instead, a coin-exchange machine installed at the entrance provided instructions as to how to use the equipment. While I was looking around, the entrance door swung open and a young man came in with a backpack on his shoulder. After having a quick search for an empty room, he got into one of them. The door quickly closed, and soon I heard the electronically based accompaniment to the Introduction of "Seo Shi" (Epic Poetry, in translation), a Korean popular song in rock-ballad genre, coming out through the door.

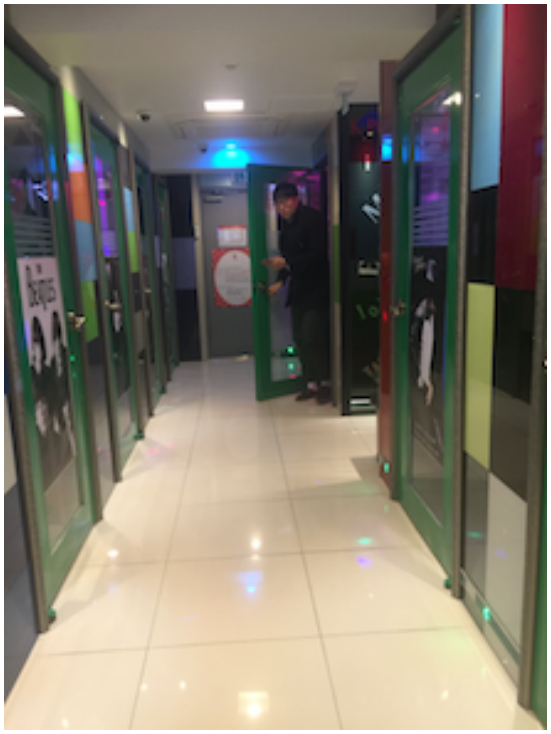

Figure 1. *Koin norae bang* in Shinchon, western Seoul

Figure 2. The inside of a room in *koin norae bang*

In the summer of 2015 I first visited the so-called "*koin norae bang*" (meaning, coin karaoke), which I had heard had recently become popular in South Korea. A Korean news article (Eom 2015) reported that a new type of karaoke establishment emerged and had proliferated near college campuses—a facility designed for just one person singing in a small booth equipped with a karaoke system, and people use it by putting coins into the karaoke machine. According to the news article, the primary customers of these new facilities are young adults in their twenties, such as college students, who come to sing by themselves. Without anybody who wishes to listen to their singing, or to enjoy singing together, the article said, these young people want to sing alone in this enclosed small space. Given the common assumption that singing is an expressive performance in front

of an audience, I was curious about this solo tendency of karaoke singing by Korean young people. Why are they singing alone? What do they feel through their solo performance without any listener? What sociocultural contexts are embedded in this musical practice?

Karaoke singing is one of the major entertainment forms in South Korea. Since its introduction in 1990, people of all ages and sexes across the country have enjoyed karaoke singing as part of their leisure practices. Yet, the experience and the meaning it has for the practitioners vary depending on their social identities, and for young people, in particular, karaoke singing has had a specific implication. Korean teenagers commonly frequent karaoke facilities where they socialize with their peers, and, as one of the most important leisure activities, karaoke singing has constituted the cultural identities of contemporary Korean youngsters. The young people now in their twenties, specifically, who are reported above to be the main customers of the newly emerged *koin norae bang,* are the generation who shares such an experience of karaoke as their primary leisure culture; they have been familiar with traditional karaoke parlors since their childhood—consider that it was introduced and disseminated in the early 1990s—and would frequently visit there with their friends when they were teenagers, which helped construct their youth identity. Then, for these young adults who have found the pleasure of karaoke singing in 'having fun with' their friends, what does it imply to sing alone in *koin norae bang* now?

In interrogating the phenomenon of solo singing in *koin norae bang* by Korean young adults, I assume that this newly emerged form of leisure has much to do with the

socioeconomic circumstance confronting these young people. In fact one of the discourses that have predominated in South Korea for the last decade is about the 'crisis of youth,' that is to say, the exacerbated living conditions of young people, which derived from the unprecedentedly high rate of youth unemployment and precarious conditions of the labor market. In Korea, where the rate of entrance into higher education is around seventy percent (OECD 2015), young people are forced to prepare for employment as soon as they enter colleges. In order to *survive* in competitive environments, they have to give up socializing and just concentrate on the preparation for their future. In addition, as the period of individual preparation to get a job becomes longer, young students are mostly economically marginalized. The popularity of *koin norae bang* among these young people, with its cheaper prices and the flexibility in time spending (by paying per song), is related to such social and economic constraints facing this young generation; it is a leisure form viable for these young adults who are strapped for cash and forced to live in isolation. In this vein, the *koin norae bang* phenomenon contains aspects that reveal how social structure has affected the cultural choices and leisure lives of contemporary Korean young people.

As many youth studies point out, leisure practices are a primary means by which young people interpret and construct their lives within a given set of circumstances and thus are central to the understanding of the experiences of youth (see Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Furlong et al. 2011; Hollands 2002). What they note is that youth cultural identities, leisure lives, and consumption practices are conditioned by material and social circumstances. Moreover, as the youth phase has become protracted with the

increase of young people's participation in higher education as well as with the rise of youth unemployment, youth researchers stress the impact of such prolonged youth transitions on the young people's lived experiences (MacDonald 2011). Informed by such perspectives of contemporary youth studies, this paper explores the practice of singing alone in *koin norae bang* by Korean young people in terms of how this leisure practice has a meaning to these young people as a reflection of their negotiations with the circumstances constraining their lives.

Youth Research: Youth Culture and Youth Transitions

The "youth culture" approach is one of the theoretical frameworks that have inspired the field of ethnomusicology. However, these studies, for the most part, rely primarily on subculture theory as conceptualized by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham in the 1970s. As the CCCS's subculture theory focused on specific music and fashion as a stylized expression of resistance, karaoke, in this respect, has tended to be viewed not so much as subculture in itself as, at best, a cultural *forum* for various subcultural expression (Drew 2005: 372). This is specifically the case for many Western European countries where karaoke is not a very popularized cultural form. Furthermore, because it is a mundane musical practice performed by ordinary people, karaoke singing has not been addressed in terms of youth culture even though it has significant implications for the lives of a majority of young people as a major leisure form.

In fact, ordinary young people's leisure and cultural lives have not been the main interest of youth culture studies for a long time. Since the innovative theorization of subculture by the CCCS in the 1970s,[1] studies of youth culture were dominated by the CCCS's subcultural approach, which, as the prefix of 'sub-' implies, concerns "agency and action belonging to a subset or social group that is distinct from dominant culture," or something unlike the majority of a population (Blackman 2005: 2). The focus of the CCCS's subculture was on the working class youth and on the interpretation of youth subculture in terms of social class and power relations. Despite the diversity of theoretical influences, from Marxism and structuralism to semiotic studies, the basic approach of the CCCS's subculture—particularly through *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) and *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige 1979)—is "to read youth cultural style as a text, to interpret each subculture through its creation of meaning as a collective force" (Blackman 2005: 6). Thus, music and styles such as punks, Teddy boys, and Mod culture were foregrounded as British working-class youth's subculture and interpreted as their attempts to resolve social contradictions. For such reasons, CCCS's subcultural theory was criticized for its overemphasis on "the stylistic appearances of particular tribes" and the "stylistic art of a few" (Clark 1982) as well as for "concentrating almost exclusively on male, white, working class cultures" (Hollands 2002: 155).

Post-subcultural theory that emerged in the 1990s as an alternative youth cultural paradigm was inspired by the post-modern theoretical perspective and aimed at challenging and moving away from CCCS subculture theory (see Muggelton 2003; Bennett 2011; Blackman 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) Its focus on individual

lifestyles and consumption choices as primary aspects of contemporary youth cultures and the celebration of young people's opportunities to choose freely among many cultural identities, however, faced criticism for overlooking the social structural influences on youth culture and their ignorance of structurally embedded inequalities (MacDonald and Shilrick 2007). Moreover, as with the CCCS's subcultural theory, the primary concern of post-subcultural studies was stylistic, spectacular music and dance scenes "at the expense of the cultural lives and leisure activities of the 'ordinary' majority" (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006: 128). In this vein, both the CCCS's subculture and post-subcultural theory have failed to provide an analysis of "the status of the culture a subculture is supposed to be 'sub' to" and gave a "misleading sense of absoluteness and dominance of the main culture" (Willis 1972).

Since the late 1990s, the desire of youth studies for "proper, holistic understanding of youth" (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006: 126) under the social and economic changes during the past few decades has led them to taking into consideration much broader dimensions of cultural lives of contemporary young people. In fact the increased attention of youth research to leisure activities reflects today's complex relationship between young people's cultural identities and their changed living conditions, and regarding this, youth *cultural* studies have sought to integrate the perspective of the youth *transitions* studies which, in investigating young people's transitions to adulthood, emphasize the structural forces that affect young people's lives, a factor almost ignored by post-subcultural theory. What youth transitions studies take note of is that, compared to former generations such as the Baby Boomers, the transitions

of present-day young people into the labor market have become prolonged, more uncertain and complex, along with the remarkable rise of unemployment as well as the increased number of young people participating in higher education.

The main concern of traditional *transitions* studies have been the economic spheres of young people's biographies, focusing on 1) the move from education into the labor market ('the school-to-work career'); 2) the achievement of independence from family ('the family career'); and 3) the move away from the parental home ('the housing career') (MacDonald and Shilrick 2007: 342), but youth researchers now highlight the *cultural* dimension of transitions as well, acknowledging the complex interactions between education, training, labor market, and leisure experience. In this regard, MacDonald and Shildrick suggested the concept of 'leisure careers'—i.e., changes in young people's free-time activities and shifting networks (*ibid*.). According to them, the *typical* pathway of young people's leisure careers is to move toward more mainstream, commercialized leisure activities with their progress in the labor market, but in the changed environment in which the movement from school to labor market is prolonged and insecure due to the restructuring of the labor market, the leisure careers are also influenced by such changes in youth transitions. In this respect, I assume that the conception of *leisure careers* is a useful framework in exploring the phenomenon of solo singing in *koin norae bang* by today's Korean young people. Given the protracted transitions into the labor market along with the precarious condition of employment that the Korean young generation is experiencing today, I argue that the practice of singing alone in *koin norae bang* as a leisure form represents the 'on-hold' state of the leisure

careers of contemporary Korean young people reflecting their socially and economically marginalized status.

Karaoke Studies and Korean Specificity

Karaoke studies, although relatively scarce thus far, have explored several issues, including karaoke's characteristics as a communication medium (Fornäs 1994) and identity construction through karaoke performance (see Lum 1996; Drew 2005, Brown 2009). Yet, from the fact that karaoke, a Japanese invention, has disseminated around the world, becoming a 'global phenomenon,' the main concern of karaoke scholarship has been the diverse ways of karaoke adaptation in different parts of the world (see Xun and Tarroco 2007; Otake and Hosokawa 2001). And in accounting for the local adoptions of karaoke, researchers have commonly underlined its close link to the preexisting cultural praxis (Kelly 2011). That is to say, the extent that karaoke is willingly embraced as a cultural practice in a society has to do with the existence of a relevant cultural practice, specifically the tradition of amateur performance or collective singing as its precursor. This is specifically the case for many Asian countries and Asian-American communities (see Lum 1996; Wong 1994; as well as Xun and Tarocco 2007), but even in some European countries like England, Italy and Sweden, such established traditions of amateur singing have been suggested as the ground for the popularity of karaoke (Kelly 2001; Fornäs 2001; Prato 2001).

The reception of karaoke in Korea, in this regard, shares such characteristics with its long tradition of public singing practice, but the pathway it has developed is quite

unique, which derives considerably from the specific historical relationship with Japan. In addition, with its nationwide popularity since the 1990s, karaoke singing has become not only a whole nation entertainment in the country, but also a specifically important leisure form for Korean young people. Although few have investigated karaoke in terms of youth culture, given that karaoke singing has taken a significant part of the leisure experiences of these young people constituting their cultural identities, it is essential to grasp the meaning of it for young people in the country. The popularity of *koin norae bang* now among Korean young people, in fact, despite the different, new meaning it has for these young people, is based on their longtime familiarity with the traditional *norae bang* (karaoke) culture. For such reasons, the interrogation of the *koin norae bang* phenomenon should be premised on the examination on how karaoke singing has been related to the cultural lives of Korean teenagers. Hence, I begin with a brief introduction to the history of karaoke in Korea, and then provide an explanation of the meaning of karaoke as a youth culture for Korean teenagers, as a background for understanding the solo singing practice in *koin norae bang* by these young adults today.

Methodology

This paper is based on the fieldwork that I conducted in both the summer and the winter of 2015. During this time I visited dozens of *koin norae bang* in Seoul, South Korea, where I could observe not only the facilities themselves but also the performances of patrons. Yet, since the phenomenon of solo singing makes difficult participatory observation by the researcher, I also conducted in-depth interviews with around twenty

young people—mostly college students—who had had the experience of karaoke solo singing. During the interviews, however, I inquired not only about their practice of *koin norae bang* singing today but also about their past experience and meaning of traditional karaoke singing, particularly during their teenage years. Thus, the explanation about karaoke singing as a youth culture is based, in large part, on the recollection of my interviewees. In addition, in order to let the phenomenon become personal for me as well, I performed by myself several times in the facilities, focusing on the feeling of singing alone.

'Norae Bang,' Korean Karaoke: The Reception of Karaoke in Korea

Karaoke was first introduced to Korea in the early 1980s. It was launched in Pusan, the second largest city located in the southeastern part of the country, and spread out gradually during the 1980s. As a port city with regular ferry operation to Japan, Pusan has been a gateway through which the traffic of goods and people between the two countries has continued and, thus, has usually been the place to receive the latest Japanese fads first. The inflow of karaoke, which had been popular in the neighboring country, into Pusan was in this context, but the form of karaoke during this period was mostly associated with the 'night market,' serving alcohol (and sometimes prostitutes as well) and mostly catering to Japanese tourists or people engaged in adult entertainment.

It was in the early 1990s that the karaoke boom began to explode and its practice dramatically expanded in the nation. And from this moment, a different form of karaoke singing became popularized throughout the country. In describing this phenomenon a new coinage of '*norae bang'* emerged, replacing the term 'karaoke' itself. In 1990, an owner of a youth game center in Pusan installed karaoke apparatus in his establishment. It was for the purpose of attracting waiting customers of the game center but soon drew the curiosity of people. They flocked into it and even queued up for singing. The karaoke machine was installed in a small booth at a corner of the game center and was operated by inserting coins and then singing a song of one's choice to the accompaniment of pre-recorded sound. With no liquor license, it came to be recognized as a singing place for all people regardless of age and sex, and was soon followed by the emergence of a number

of new establishments which adopted this form of karaoke singing with similar rules. The nationwide spread of this new type of karaoke establishment was very fast—approximately 15,000 establishments were opened within two years (Song 1997: 233), and it has been perceived to be the first business model of '*norae bang'* in Korea.

Norae bang (singing room, in translation) is a Korean term for karaoke. It usually means an establishment which contains several enclosed rooms equipped with a video screen and karaoke machine, and there, customers usually coming in groups, take the stage to sing to the accompaniment that the karaoke machine plays while the lyrics appear on the screen with visual imagery (Creighton 2006: 123). Coined in the early 1990s, when a Korean-style karaoke form had national success, the term *norae bang* came to substitute for the Japanese word 'karaoke.' Although the term 'karaoke' is still used among Korean people, it usually takes on a different connotation; 'karaoke' tends to refer to expensively priced, elegant places for decadent adult entertainment, while *norae bang,* on the other hand, with its relatively lower prices and the prohibition of serving alcohol, has been recognized as a place suitable for the entertainment of all citizens of the nation. Although *norae bang* is, in fact, a particular form of karaoke—more or less similar to the form of the 'karaoke box' in Japan (Ogawa 2001), Koreans rarely call *norae bang* 'karaoke.' Indeed, as Otake and Hosokawa point out, Korea is probably "the only country where karaoke is called something else" (Otake and Hosokawa. 2001: 186). And underneath such a 'Koreanized' name of karaoke is located a specific relationship between the two countries.

The experience of colonization by Japan during the first half of the twentieth century has left Koreans with a repulsion of Japan, which has become a considerable part of Korean nationalism. In fact, due to the tension between the two countries, the official importing of Japanese cultural products had long been banned until the late 1990s, and the use of the Japanese language in public had also been prohibited. The replacement of the Japanese word 'karaoke' with the Korean '*norae bang,'* in this respect, is not surprising. However, besides the switch of the term, the rivalry with Japan spurred Korean corporations to produce a karaoke machine of their own, which has led to a different path of the development of the karaoke industry in Korea. A small venture company named Young Pung Electronic Co. released the first Korean-made karaoke machine in 1988 (Song 1997). In an interview quoted by Otake and Hosokawa, a staff member of this company recalled that their owner had decided to "invent Korea's own karaoke with a computer" when he had witnessed the influx of Japanese karaoke in Pusan, which he considered to be "an invasion of Japanese culture" (Otake and Hosokawa: 186). Distinguished from the Japanese product that played a Compact Disc or a Laser Disc, this Korean-made karaoke machine employed a computer music program with digitalized sound information. With its technological innovation, as well as price superiority, Korean-style karaoke machines successfully occupied the domestic market when *norae bang* boom first swept the country in the early 1990s. One result of this was the exclusion of the Japanese-made apparatus in the Korean *norae bang* market from its inception, and the Korean *norae bang kikye* (karaoke apparatus) companies have not only

dominated the domestic market since then, but have also exported their products to various countries including Japan.

Such an independent path that the Korean *norae bang* industry opened from its beginning has had the effect of making Koreans rarely conscious of the origin of karaoke. Moreover, as there have existed in Korea various kinds of leisure places that are named something ending with '*bang'* (room)—for example, *video bang* (a room furnished with TV screen and video player for watching a movie by renting a video), *PC bang* (a place for playing computer games such as StarCraft), *manhwa bang* (a place where people rent and read comic books) and so on—, Koreans have perceived the so-called '*bang munwha'* (room culture) to be their own unique culture and *norae bang* to be part of it.

However, the phenomenon of Korean *norae bang* shares some characteristics commonly observed in the reception of karaoke by other cultures: the existence of amateur singing practice. Indeed, social singing by ordinary people has been a very long tradition in Korea as a recreational culture that has been usually combined with dining and drinking at gatherings with family, friends, and villagers. Some Koreans even quote Chen Shou's *San guo zhi*, a Chinese historical text written in the third century, which includes a description of the practice of common people singing in Korea. In addition, both the old tradition of 'singing banquet'—"a custom whereby the aristocracy sang songs to accompany social gatherings during banquets" (Creighton 2006: 132)—and the folk cultures of singing in social gatherings are also frequently referred to by many Koreans as evidences for their common belief that Koreans are the people who really love singing. Yet, the most telling argument for the existence of amateur singing practice

comes from the older interlocutors I interviewed who spent their youth in the pre-karaoke period. They mostly reminisce their common experiences of public singing at various social gatherings before the advent of *norae bang*: singing at home with family members, singing in restaurants and drinking houses with friends and colleagues, singing in the open air when they go on a picnic or have a social gathering, and even singing on the streets for demonstrations.

In this respect, there is little doubt that the existing practice of amateur singing became the basis for the national popularity of *norae bang* in Korea, as is the case for other parts of the world in which karaoke has been widely popularized. However, the very embedded singing practice in Koreans as a long cultural tradition made some of them embarrassed at the phenomenon of *norae bang* in its early phase. A few of my interlocutors recalled their hostilities toward *norae bang* when it first appeared because they felt strange with the spatial separation of singing from the whole set of collective recreational activities they used to engage in, and they were also dissatisfied with the very fact of singing to the machine (staring at the monitor to follow the lyrics instead of keeping eye contact with participants)—their previous singing practice had usually been with simple accompaniments like the acoustic guitar, or in many cases, with just clapping to the rhythms by members who joined the gatherings. People who were critical of *norae bang* believed that the traditional social meaning of public singing as cultivating community spirit and harmony had collapsed as a result of the popularity of the machine-mediated, commercialized way of singing. In fact, the *norae bang* phenomenon in Korea does not just reflect the national love of singing, but also signifies a shift in the way of

singing practice itself. While Creighton contends that the engagement of *norae bang* reflects current versions of Korean singing practice (*Ibid*.), the implication of the *norae bang* phenomenon for the Korean's cultural practice extends beyond that; it means the commodification of singing itself, reflecting the structural change in life styles that Koreans have experienced during the process of individualization and urbanization (Song 2014).

Norae Bang As a Youth Culture

With its nationwide popularity, *norae bang* has come to be established as a form of popular mass culture in Korea, but this new technology-mediated practice of singing has appealed specifically to young people. Most of all, as they have spent their childhood surrounded by the *norae bang* culture that was established in the early 1990s, for these Korean youths *norae bang* has been a very natural place to go singing since they were very young. Particularly during their adolescence—when they are middle- and high-school students, *norae bang* becomes significantly important as a place for their leisure, and the way these young people enjoy and experience *norae bang* is quite different from that of their older counterparts. *Norae bang* singing is a very common cultural practice shared by most Korean youths through which they not only forge their youth identities but also negotiate the circumstances constraining their everyday lives.

Although many youth studies in the West have emphasized the social divisions and inequalities within young people, which have become the ground for class culture, what should first be considered in examining *norae bang* singing practice in terms of youth culture is the specific local context of Korea, in which young people are defined predominantly as "students" at the expense of other identities, and their daily lives are, to a great extent, constructed by schooling (Yoon 2006). Schooling is one of the most important factors that influence the identity formation of Korean youngsters because of its strong impact on the whole lives of young people. The popularity of mass education and higher education in Korea is closely linked to the notion that schooling is "a short cut to social mobility," which has long been held by Koreans through the rapid process of

modernization after the Korean War. Even though such a belief has more and more been questioned as the polarization of wealth along with social division has become more serious in Korean society, investment in the education of young people has never diminished. However, because Korean secondary education is very homogenized and extremely exam-oriented, most young students are forced to concentrate on the preparation for the university entrance exam, and their academic achievements are evaluated through competition. For this reason, despite the various socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and the different levels of family support they receive, most teenagers tend to identify themselves in terms of academic ambitions and attitudes toward schooling rather than by their social class.[2] And the oppressive and competitive conditions of Korean education system make students feel under great pressure throughout their secondary school years.

Under such circumstances, *norae bang* singing is one of the few leisure forms that Korean young people can afford. Given the limited variety of cultural places for adolescents, *norae bang* is the venue that students can relatively easily access as the establishments have proliferated all over the places. It is a place for them to visit to make use of their spare time whenever they have it—after they finish exams or for birthday parties, for instances. What is intriguing, however, is that most Korean young students, with few exceptions, go to and experience the venue with their peer groups as part of their leisure practice. In fact, in the interviews with young people who are now in their twenties, there was nobody who hadn't visited *norae bang* in their teenage years.

Norae bang singing as a cultural practice of Korean youths has a close link to the strains from the educational environment that these teenagers are forced to withstand, and this hints at why Korean young people are "*singing*" for their leisure. In fact, despite the variety of pleasures that the act of singing potentially offers, most Korean teenagers articulate their *norae bang* singing to the pressures from their school life. Relieving stresses from academic burdens is indeed one of the most important reasons for their going to *norae bang,* and singing is a means for Korean youngsters to cope with the environment constraining their daily lives. Moreover, the pressure imposed on them is usually expressed through the way of singing in very explicit manners within the enclosed *norae bang* space. One of my interviewees recalled that she would frequent *norae bang* almost every week with her schoolmates during her middle- and high-school years, and said, "We used to enjoy like crazy." She explained that she usually selected cheerful songs in fast tempos that could allow her to *shout* (rather than to *sing*) and dance (as well as jump) to the accompaniment of the songs, which she emphasized definitely helped to vent their stresses. Not only she but most of my interviewees agreed that they would visit *norae bang* and sing to forget temporarily the educational pressure as well as to get along with their peers. "Enjoy like crazy" was the very expression that most of my interviewees chose in accounting for their *norae bang* singing experiences during their teenage years, and they commonly related such practices of singing to their monotonous school life. These young people would usually try to keep heated atmospheres during the time of their *norae bang* singing, and such a frenetic mood was generally regarded among the youth as a tacit norm to follow; if one chose a melancholic song of a slow

ballad genre in between such cheerful environments, he or she would be playfully blamed for spoiling the mood.

Norae bang as a leisure place for teenagers, on the other hand, implies that it is a space "which young people can enter on their own terms and on their own initiative, unaccompanied and unsupervised by adults" (Hall et al. 1999: 506). Hall and his colleagues argue for the importance of leisure space separated from adults in the formation of youth identities. According to them, young people interact with their peer group in recreational space, and "[i]t is in the course of such informal interaction, away from parents and teachers, that significant aspects of young people's personal and social identities are affirmed, contested, rehearsed and reworked" (*Ibid*.). In this regard, *norae bang* plays an important role as a place for socializing among the peer group, in which young people construct their youth identities through informal interactions. Specifically, given that the interactions among the peer group in the *norae bang* scene are mediated through singing performance, it is worthwhile to note how young people express themselves through the act of singing itself. Generally, singing is perceived to be one way of expressing the self in front of an audience, and as an effective way of expressing the self, singing abilities are usually considered to be important. Indeed, the capacity to sing well is valued among Korean young people, too. An interviewee told me that he would sometimes rehearse singing privately for a successful *norae bang* performance in front of his friends. He said that it is a way of achieving recognition among his peer group. Another interviewee said that singing talent could be a useful means to gain confidence in school life as well.

Nonetheless, showing off one's singing ability, or appreciating good performances of others, is just one part of the *norae bang* practice by Korean young people. In fact, many of my interviewees who are enthusiastic *norae bang* goers self-evaluate their singing capacities as mediocre, but they told me with one voice that they did not care about it; singing talent really does not matter to them in enjoying *norae bang* singing. As the expression of "enjoy like crazy" insinuates, the *norae bang* performance of young people is basically aimed at "having fun with friends" itself, in which the appreciation of high quality performance is not necessarily counted as significant. Rather than that, they sometimes enjoy poor performances made both by themselves and their friends; off-key singing usually gives a laugh to their friends rather than rendering the singer ashamed. One male interviewee told me that he would deliberately pick the songs that were originally sung by female singers in order to make the audience amused, and that he considered the ability to amuse his friends to be important in their socializing. In short, the expression of oneself as well as the appreciation of the performance of others through the *norae bang* singing by the Korean youth is not necessarily done through virtuosic performance. What is more important to these young people is to build intimacies with their peers as part of their sociality, which contributes to the making of youth identities.

Singing Alone in *Koin Norae Bang*

Koin norae bang is, as I explained earlier, a new type of *norae bang,* differentiated from the traditional form in two ways: first, as the term "*koin*" (the phonetic notation for the English word "coin") added to *norae bang* denotes, it is, like a vending machine, a facility operated by inserting coins into a *norae bang* machine per each song. Whereas conventional *norae bangs* usually charge 15,000 won (around 14 dollars) or more per hour, in *koin norae bang* singing one song costs 300 won (25 cents) and two 500 won. Another difference lies in the size of each singing space. While traditional parlors furnish themselves with rooms big enough for four people or more, the typical *koin norae bang* is equipped with booth-like spaces as small as only around 3.3 square meters, catering exclusively for singles or two patrons. It is, as it were, a place designed for singing on one's own.

Singing in a small booth by putting coins into the machine, however, is not a brand new phenomenon in the country. In fact the first *norae bang* that was introduced in Pusan in 1990 was a singing booth installed in a game center operated by inserting coins, as explained above. Although it was quickly replaced with the current *norae bang* form, *norae bang* booths installed as a subsidiary facility in game centers have remained in existence, the regular customers of which are usually the game center's teenage patrons. However, due to the poor quality of the apparatus (limited number of song repertoire and poor soundproof facility), game center's singing booth has not been so popular as the general form of *norae bang*.

The *koin norae bang* that recently emerged, in contrast, is an establishment for the exclusive purpose of singing, equipped with sound systems and musical content equivalent to 'full-scale' *norae bang*. In addition, since it is self-operational and easy to manage, allowing for the saving of labor costs, *koin norae bang* attracted many entrepreneurs as a niche market and quickly proliferated during the past few years. Nonetheless, the sites in which *koin norae bangs* have taken hold so far have been only the neighborhoods where college campuses are located, or the places in which young people exist in substantial numbers.

Shinchon, western Seoul, is one such area, where several college campuses, including Yonsei University, are located. It is also a commercial district always thronged with young people. In the summer of 2015, when I first visited there, a dozen *koin norae bangs* were already open for business near this neighborhood. '*Shinchon 24 Shi Koin Norae Bang'* (Shinchon 24 Hours *Koin Norae Bang*) was one of them, which was located within just around ten minutes' walk of Yonsei University. Although it was daytime when I went to the establishment, I found that most of the approximately fifteen rooms in total were filled with patrons, most of whom—seemingly young college students—were singing alone. Later, I happened to speak with a *koin norae bang* goer who was a student of Yonsei University. Woosung,[3] 22, told me that he frequents a *koin norae bang* near school when he has spare moments such as the time in-between classes or on his way back home, and added that he has many friends who enjoy similar practices. What he counted as the merit of *koin norae bang* was its flexibility in time spending as well as the affordability: "while traditional *norae bang* charges at an hourly rate, in *koin norae bang*

I can sing just the number of songs that I feel like by paying per song. As I usually sing about seven to eight songs at a time, I can enjoy it only with around 2,000 won (less than two dollars)."

Yongsoo, 26, is another college student who goes to Soongsil University in southern Seoul. As a fourth-year student, he was spending very busy days in preparing for employment. He told me that he was very pleased when *koin norae bang* establishments opened near his school, and that he occasionally visits there at the time of night on his way home after studying in the library of his school: "I usually stop by *koin norae bang* around 11p.m. or as late as 2 a.m., after finishing my study in a library. As it is cheap and I don't have time enough to hang out with my friends usually, I go alone to *koin norae bang* and sing several songs to relieve stresses."

Yongsoo's daily life is not unusual for most of college students in the country. Although they have already gone through tough competitions in order to enter university, what is awaiting them is even tougher competitions. As getting a job has become more and more difficult, they have to begin preparations for it as soon as they enter university—struggling not only to get good grades but also to obtain various kinds of certificates. In addition, young people who cannot get financial support from parents have to work part-time while studying. One of the outcomes of such hectic environments in terms of their cultural lives is that it is not easy for them to arrange time for socializing with their friends. Moreover, many college students voluntarily give up relationships with others in order to concentrate on preparing for employment in the highly competitive environment. Hence, many young people live in isolation by doing many things alone

such as studying, eating, drinking and even watching movies. In fact, the so-called "single-person culture" (*nahollo munhwa*) is fast becoming a new trend these days in the country alongside the rapid increase of the single-person household, and media outlets frequently feature stories about people enjoying single life in a variety of ways, as well as the boom of related businesses. Yet, for the young people who have to hide in a library cubicle to eat lunch alone, what such solo tendencies reveal is the grim reality in which they are deprived of the free time necessary for socializing. A local daily newspaper recently reported a survey on the habit of eating along, in which over fifty percent of the respondents in their twenties answered that they eat alone because they are pressed for time or they have difficulty in finding friends to eat with (Suh 2016).

In this context, the practice of singing alone in *koin norae bang* can be viewed as part of such individualized and isolated lifestyles shaping the daily lives of this young generation today. *Koin norae bang* is, in some respects, a *norae bang* form where they *can* go alone to sing even though they don't have a friend to go with, rather than a form where they *want* to go alone. Without having to sing at least for an hour as in the traditional *norae bang* parlors, young people can now sing as many songs as they feel like alone by virtue of the new payment method adopted by *koin norae bang.* In fact, the greatest appeal of *koin norae bang* to young people is, as the two students referred to above, lies in its cheaper prices and the flexibility in time spending, which reflects the social condition that compels them to survive in this competitive society.

The participation of a majority of young people in higher education is one of the key aspects of contemporary youth transitions, as many youth scholars have noted

(Furlong et al. 2011; Wyn and Andres 2011; MacDonald 2011), but the current rate of entrance into university education as high as seventy percent in South Korea is indeed exceptional. In the West, university education had been an explicitly classed experience, the preserve of upper-class people, and thus, as Willis demonstrated, the working class culture was shaped through the resistance in the *school* as a way of social reproduction (Willis 1977). What the increase of educational participation today means, therefore, is that the once clear linkage between university entry and social class has been weakened (Furlong 2000). In Korea, on the other hand, education has been regarded as one of the few means for social mobility, provided for people of every class as an equal opportunity during the course of rapid modernization and industrialization, and thus it has boosted the enthusiasm for higher education among people. Hence, it is less likely that the Korean educational system has been based on "class-based segregation" (*Ibid*.: 346) compared to those in many western countries, but university students were traditionally regarded as a relatively privileged group in Korea as well because until the early 1990s only thirty percent of young people went to universities in the country.

Now, the highest level of the proportion of university students in the population among the OECD countries (OECD 2015) is a result not only of the Korean 'education fever' but also of the state policy that has increased the number of both universities and students for the past few decades. And the result is that the status of university students itself no longer guarantees any advantage for their future, a phenomenon shared with many western countries today despite the contextual differences. This is neither to suggest that those who did not, or could not, enter college are in the same condition as

these college students, nor to intend to argue that there do not exist inequalities within college students, but what is at issue in Korea today is that this young generation *as a whole* is suffering from the crisis of work and is experiencing very precarious living conditions, which, in large part, derived from the neoliberal reforms of the state in the late twentieth century. Since the financial crisis of 1997, which spurred the country's neoliberal turn, the major victim of the process of flexibilization of the labor market has been the young people, who are now suffering from not only the decreased job opportunities, but also the lower job quality; the percentage of non-regular, temporary laborers among the young wage workers has more and more increased, not to mention the soaring rate of youth unemployment, and the young people who work at part time jobs are usually outside the protection of labor law (Yoo 2015).

One of the young people's reactions to such worsened economic conditions has been to seek a job with security over anything else, and jobs in the public sector top the list. The daily *Korea Times,* in this regard, reported that younger Koreans are forsaking their dreams in favor of lifetime employment (Lee et al. 2014). As more and more students, regardless of their major, are hoping for jobs in pursuit of stability, the competition for civil service exams has reached record highs.[4] Usually, people who aim to take the required exams have to devote at least a whole year or more to preparing for them, and it is common for many of them to sign up for private cram schools ('*hagwon*,' in Korean) and to move into a residential facility named '*gosiwon*' (a lodging place for people preparing for state exams, translated literally), which means a cheap, tiny single-room, to concentrate on their study. Noryangjin, southern Seoul, is a district where a

cluster of *hagwon* and *gosiwon* are gathered for those preparing for state-run exams for public servants. There it is easy to observe crowds of young people heading for *hagwons* all day long and small businesses in this neighborhood mostly catering to these young people. And I found that *koin norae bang* in this region was a more sprawling business than anywhere else.

To become a person who prepares for civil service exams means to give up almost all social relationships and to live in isolation in order to focus on one's studies. Living a monotonous as well as nervous life linked only to the preparation for the exams, these young people commonly feel anxious and depressed. Furthermore, since they have to give up almost their social life, including economic activities, they are mostly strapped for cash. In such circumstances, *koin norae bangs* in Noryangjin are full of those young people who want to vent their stresses and relieve depressions with their pocket money. Particularly during lunchtime and after lectures in *hagwon,* young people surge into *koin norae bang* to have their short break by singing on their own. A student on a leave of absence whom I interviewed, who has already spent over a year in preparation for civil servant exam, confessed that singing at *koin norae bang* is almost the only leisure activity he could afford for refreshing himself while studying. For a person who does not have enough money, time, and even a friend, he said, *koin norae bang* was a place to give him comfort, and singing alone there helped him to relieve stresses and anxieties, albeit temporarily. Indeed, the landscape of Noryangjin exemplifies the tough reality that the young generation today is experiencing, and how the cultural practice of singing alone dovetails with such a harsh reality.

With the rise in youth unemployment and the increased proportions of employment in part-time and temporary jobs, youth transitions are now marked by discontinuities, uncertainties and backtracking (Furlong 2000). The "once the straightforward transition from school and work" (Hollands 2002: 159) has been disturbed not only by longer periods of individual preparation for jobs but also by the unstable move between education and marginalized labor. In fact, it is very common in Korea for college students to postpone their graduation or to return to study after a period in the labor market as a casual worker. Ji-Eun, 24, was working as a part-time intern for a broadcasting company when I first met her. She began the temporary work after graduating from college. Since she had failed to get a full-time, regular job as she had wanted by the time she graduated, she decided to be employed temporarily and continue to prepare for a better job while working. Still, she was very anxious about her uncertain future, and this was related to the reason she frequents *koin norae bang*: "When I sing alone, I feel better. I like to be alone there because I get relaxed for a while with forgetting the burden on my shoulder."

Indeed, the emotions that most of my interviewees have associated with their solo singing were depression, sadness, loneliness, anxieties, and so forth, and they said that it is usually when they feel down rather than when they are pleased that they go to *koin norae bang* to sing alone. One interviewee, to my question about the reason for it, asked me back: "why would I sing alone when I feel happy?" What she reaffirmed is that the greater pleasure of singing for these young people still resides in 'having fun with' their friends, as they used to do while they grew up. However, although it sometimes is an

inevitable choice to go singing alone in the given circumstances facing this young generation, young people do the solo singing because they gain satisfaction and find meaning through it. In fact the practice of singing alone in *koin norae bang,* not just as one form of leisure but as a musical practice, challenges the common assumption of singing performance as an expression of the self in front of others. What the phenomenon of singing alone implies is that the 'expression of the self' through singing is not necessarily toward others. Singing alone in *koin norae bang* is like a dialogue with oneself associated with self-consolation. For contemporary Korean young people who are now struggling to survive in a world of insecurities and risks, *koin norae bang* plays a role as a haven, and through solo singing these young people comfort themselves and temporarily escape the pressures imposed on them. *Koin norae bang*, in this vein, provides an opportunity to expand our notion of the meaning of singing as well as the role that music plays in the daily lives of ordinary people.

Conclusion

In their conceptualization of 'leisure careers,' MacDonald and Shildrick confined their research to the marginalized youths of Northeast England, who had nothing to do but hang around the neighborhood estates as their dominant form of leisure, highlighting their unequal access to leisure experience based on social division. Many other contemporary youth researchers have also, although arguing for interpreting youth culture more broadly, focused largely on 'disadvantaged' youth, while paying less attention to other categories of young people, such as service workers, middle-class youths, and higher education students (Hollands 2002: 160). What the practice of solo singing in *koin norae bang* implies, however, is that it is a leisure form that represents the *overall* status of contemporary Korean young people as socially isolated and economically marginalized. Although not denying the existence of social divisions and inequalities within youth population in the country, what is evident is that young people in Korea as a whole are now suffering from the exacerbated living conditions which derived from the changed structure of transition, and their 'leisure careers', without moving into more commercialized, mainstream consumer culture, become impoverished, restricted to the cheap, lonely form of leisure represented by *koin norae bang*. In this respect, *koin norae bang* implies a sort of 'leisure poverty' of these young people who are economically marginalized and socially isolated, with their progress in the labor market 'on hold.'

Norae bang singing in Korea, in general, is a cheerful leisure activity that gives the practitioners the pleasure of socializing with their friends and colleagues. Particularly

to the young people who have been familiar with the *norae bang* culture since their childhood, the experience of *norae bang* singing has been deeply ingrained as a daily leisure practice, constituting their cultural identities. The popularity of *koin norae bang* among these young people reflects such a cultural familiarity of young people with the *norae bang* culture on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it reveals the socioeconomic hardships that now face Korean youth. Young people who are struggling to survive in this severe neoliberal environment go to *koin norae bang* to relieve their depression with their pocket money. Singing alone in *koin norae bang* is indeed a gloomy self-portrait of today's Korean young generation who cannot but soothe their isolation and marginalization by singing alone.

Notes

[1] The concept of subculture had been used from the early twentieth century in both the United States and Britain by the Chicago School and British psychologists respectively in dealing with the issue of youth delinquencies (see Blackman 2005).

[2] Yoon, in his research on the cultural practice of 'mainstream' Korean teenagers, categorizes them into "ordinary," "brain," and "slackers," according to attitudes to schooling, which he argues is a crucial criterion for young Koreans' cultural identities. And in such division, "ordinary" is used to describe the majority of young people in high school (Yoon 2006).

[3] All the names of my interviewees in this article are pseudonyms.

[4] For the city government's exam for the recruitment of level 9 employees in 2014, for example, 110,641 applied, and "some 300,000 applied for the 10,557 low clerical posts at the Seoul Metropolitan Government and other 16 local administrations" (Korea Times Aug 3, 2014)

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